

Take a Critical Look at How You Dole Out Criticism

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(EDITOR'S NOTE: **Business communications has never been more complicated - Cell phones, video conferencing, e-mails, web content, correspondence, reports and presentations cause even the greatest writer or orator to stir with apprehension that their message is clearly understood. Each month this column will explore the many different ways each of us can learn to communicate more plainly.**)

Do you have a friend or family member that can tell you just about anything negative, and you rarely take it the wrong way? You know, the kind of friend or family member that can tell you an outfit is ill-fitting or that you have been procrastinating too long about cleaning out the garage or changing your bad eating habits?

Have you ever stopped to think why some people can say these brutally honest things to us, yet we don't get mad? And isn't it interesting that there are other people in our lives who can barely hint at criticism and we get mad, take it personally and tune the person and the comment out...even if the criticism is valid and the person is looking out for our best interest?

The difference in these two scenarios usually lies in the way criticism is delivered. If it is delivered in the wrong way, it tears down relationships. If it is delivered in the right way, it can enhance honesty in a relationship and give each of us insight to improve ourselves. Here are a few tips for delivering criticism in an effective way:

1. **Direct your criticism at the action or behavior and never the person.** Don't say: "You are a lazy, slob---your room is always such a mess." Instead say: "Your room is a mess. It needs to be cleaned up."
2. **Be specific and avoid generalizations.** Don't say: "You always show up 15 minutes late to meetings." Instead say, "I noticed you showed up late for the meeting on Tuesday. I am concerned that this may be becoming a pattern."
3. **Make sure the behavior or action that is being criticized can actually be changed.** For instance, if your spouse is a lousy cook, has no interest in cooking and has not cooked in 20 years, chances are slim that your spouse will morph into a gourmet chef after being criticized.
4. **Show you are willing to help with the issue by using words like "we" and "us" in your conversation.** Don't make threats and accusations. Consider offering an incentive for the person to change.
5. **Be clear about your reasons for criticizing the other person's actions.** Is the behavior disrupting the office? Is the behavior making it difficult for others to get their work done? Are you concerned about your spouse's health?

6. **Make your point and move on.** Don't belabor the point----that just makes it worse and makes the person feel bad.
7. **Don't get angry or sarcastic.** Most people don't respond positively to these emotions.
8. **Tell the person you understand how it feels to struggle with an issue.** You might even be able to share how you struggled with a similar issue and how you overcame it.
9. **If you are putting your criticism in writing, cool off before sending it.** Make sure that you don't unnecessarily "copy" others on your email or memo.
10. **Practice the "sandwich" technique.** Whether having a conversation or writing an email or memo, begin and end your communication with positive, affirmative statements.

"Good criticism is very rare and always precious" –

Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803–1882), U.S. essayist, poet, philosopher. *"Culture," The Conduct of Life* (1860).